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TO TWO UNKNOWN LADIES¹

BY AMY LOWELL

LADIES, I do not know you, and I think
I do not want to. And a strange beginning
I make with that. Admitted; there's the odds.
You live between the covers of a book,
At least for me, but then I've known a crowd
Of other people who do that. My mind
Is stuffed with phantoms out of poets' brains.
But you are out of nothing but the air,
Or were, rather, for one of you is dead.
Dead or alive, it is the same to me,
Since all our contact lies in printer's ink.

But even this, peculiar as it is,
Is but a thread of singularity.
Here is another, that I see you double,
Each one beheld in profile, as it were.
And yet the full-face view is not composite,
But shows two totally specific halves
Which do not blend and still are not distinct.
And again why should I perplex my eyes
With trying so hard to draw you both together
As though you were a lighted candle, split
Upon an oculist's dissecting spectacles?

You see the thing is really not so simple
As A. B. C., or Keats, or "Christabel,"
And that is where the plague comes in for me.
For here, sitting quite calmly in my chair,
Settled down comfortably to an evening's reading,
I open up the queerest possibility,
Namely: the visitation of a ghost.
Suppose I throw you down the glove at once

¹ The "Unknown Ladies" are the Misses Somerville and Ross, whose writings on Irish Life and Character have captivated many readers besides Miss Lowell.—EDITOR.

And say I'm haunted, does that bring the answer?
If so, it blurs beyond what I can grasp
And foggy answers leave us where we were.

If either of you much attracted me
We could fall back upon phenomena
And make a pretty story out of psychic
Balances, but not to be too broad
In my discourtesy, nor prudish neither
(Since, really, I can hardly quite suppose
With all your ghostliness you follow me),
I feel no such attraction. Or if one
Bows to my sympathy for the briefest space,
Snap—it is gone! And, worst of all to tell,
What broke it is not in the least dislike
But utter boredom.

Now I acknowledge you are sensible,
And so I put it squarely; is there not
A strange absurdity in being haunted
By ghosts who crack one's jaws upon a yawn?
If that were all of it! But nothing's all.
For just as I am oozing into sleep,
See-sawing gently out of consciousness,
A phrase of yours will laugh out loud and clang
Me broad awake. And still there's more to come:
Sometimes I catch the faintest whiff of flutes.
And that I hold to be a paradox.

Did ever ladies lead so dull a life
As you? At least according to my taste
(I'll be polite enough to put it so).
You wrote, but, Great Saint Peter, tell me how!
With half a destiny. Now we, poor devils,
Fill our ink-wells with entrails, pour our veins
To wet a pencil point, and end at last
As shrivelled as a pod of money-wort,
And (let me say this in a neat aside)
We hope as shining. So do artists live,
And skulls are best when turned to flower-pots.

Now your way: Half a year, or more, or less;
A book tossed off between two sets of tennis,

Or jotted down some morning of hard frost
When the hounds could not run. Pale Jesus Christ,
Is this an effort worthy to be classed
Beyond the writing of cake recipes?
One of you painted. Well, you have no shame
To call such trash a picture. Years and years
You studied with the patient, stupid zeal
Of every amateur, and to this day
You never guess how badly you have done.

You speak of music, and my nerve-ends sting
Thinking of Chopin sentimentalized
By innocent young ladyhood; of Liszt
Doted upon, his tinsel rhodomontade
Held for high romance. And the ghastly nights
On cracked hotel pianos! It would be
Experience to read of washier stuff.
And yet—and yet—this clearly is not all.
Or why should I go back to you again,
Evening and evening, in a kind of thirst,
Surprising my tongue upon an almond taste.

A puzzling business. Everything comes back
And hooks upon a question. I suspect
Myself of cheating, stacking a full pack
With diamond Jacks extraordinary and Queens
Of Spades enough to make a declaration
Of quite superb inviolability.
But if the pack were dealt again, what then?
So what's the truth behind my set of it,
If I can keep my eyes clear long enough
To get a squint thereat? Almonds, I said,
Smooth, white, and bitter, wonderfully almonds.

Your fingers were unequal to the task
Of fashioning pictures, they were not enough.
For pictures take the whole and whip it round
To something out of you; and this you could
Contrive, but not as artists, since this thing
Was not your making. You were pigment, line.
I will not split you up to parts and parts,
Suffice it that the pictures here are you.
Double and single, like chrysanthemums,

Each of one family, but with just differences
Of color and habit and the arch of stem.

Two halves, I said, and here I patterned rightly.
A frail half and a virile, but both shoots
Of one straight mother tree. It is your nobleness
That shocks a fire across these photographs
And makes them a contentment for strained eyes
Hurt by the ugliness of crowds in streets,
Stumbling short-sighted in a group of gargoyles.
You might have posed for caryatides,
With wind-drawn garments sucking round your limbs,
Your beauty blushing through their flattened gauze,
Before a temple, on a sunny day.

I wonder I am Greek enough to feel
Such solace in mere outline. But again,
As always where I find you are concerned,
This does not finish your effect. For when
I write down Greek, it is inadequate.
Marble you are, but there's that jet of fire
Like a red sunset on a fall of snow.
I feel a wind blowing off heather hills,
Am vaguely conscious of the moan of waves,
And sea-weed fronds pulsating in a pool.
Now this, of course, is anything but Greek.

Horses and dogs! You say yourself that they
Are stuck with limpet-closeness to your life.
And there, I think, is more than parallel.
For dogs and horses have a wistfulness,
A pathos, in their bursts of gaiety
Which tears the heart, even when crinky-tail
Sets dogs in bundles racing round a lawn
Or snaps a horse's feet to jiggling springs
Cat-dancing with a sudden twitch of ears.
And you are both like that, for your jokes bob
Under taut flags across a bay of tears.

That figure is so old, I feel a twinge
Of hot compunction at using it again.
But even artists stub their toes sometimes
Upon the fallen centuries, and Helen

Was much considered by the youth of Troy.
I think perhaps your prototypes in Sparta
Called forth that metaphor. But let it pass.
It is a fact that my eyes itch and burn
At this of you on horseback. Foolish! Oh,
Shall you call folly at this time of day,
You, who tell tales of banshees in a park!

Again a facet. Like a lapidary
I cut and cut in microscopic flakes,
But never get the gem for all these sides.
There's more to you than single flesh and blood
Though these be fine and clear as new-stripped almonds.
And more than tears; but what it is drifts out
Beyond the surf-line of my consciousness
And blurs in dazzle so I lose its edge.
The puzzle grows as I unravel it,
For all these feelings come out of a book
And you, who cannot write, have written it.

There's food for many solitary munchings,
And sticks to beat an artist's soul withal.
You cannot write and look what you have written:
Two lives which stare and twinkle on the page
So that I blind in looking. That's a glare
To put out farthing candles of professionals.
Had I not seen your drawings, I might almost
Have been bewitched by that hotel piano
And guessed you better understood your Chopin.
Now I am all at sea and clinging
To horses and a cat-leap at a fence.

Well, there it stands, and what I get is life,
And love held back and breaking up and out.
Your heart is never on your sleeve, you say;
But try your hardest, it is in your pen,
And death is nothing to vitality
Swinging across a second heart. At best
One sees a breeding like those draperies
Which cool my naked caryatides.
Why, I'm not dead, but merely gone in space
And that you slap away with easy hand
Drawing me closer much than you intend.

Perhaps the very queerest of these facts
Is that I feel apologies are due
For just this thing which wakes my admiration.
You do not want me crowding in behind
That carefully embroidered sleeve, and yet
What I behold mounts to a blazing altar,
And both are there before it, worshipping.
Will you forgive this little pinch of incense,
For one of you is dead and she will know,
Perhaps, at least, what magic brought me here.
And I will never seek to meet the other,
I only write to exorcise a ghost.

AMY LOWELL.